

Isaacs charts activist role as News Council chairman

By Jane Levere

Norman Isaacs, new chairman of the National News Council, calls himself the "grandfather of the ethics movement."

Geriatric protestations to the contrary, the 68-year-old news veteran is still in there fighting, eagerly planning and implementing new projects at the NNC. The media watchdog organization has been making a concerted effort to expand its range of activities ever since an independent evaluation committee suggested it "take steps to bring its work more widely and more positively to the attention of the public and the profession" last winter.

Born in England, raised in Canada, but all-American in his newspaper career, Isaacs, interviewed at the Council's New York offices recently, seemed particularly pleased with current expansion in NNC activity.

"If it were not for my devotion to the concept (of an independent media watchdog organization), I would not have gone near the Council all these years," he said. "I felt at the beginning that blinders had been put on it by its original charter."

Until the release of the evaluation committee report last February, the NNC, established in 1973 with grants primarily from the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation and Twentieth Century Fund, considered complaints on fairness and accuracy of news reporting in the "national" media, specifically, "the national print and electronic news organizations, the nationwide wire services as well as supplemental wire services, the national weekly news magazines and broadcast networks."

The evaluation committee recommended that the organization broaden its purview to include "the entire nation and all media whether national or local in initial circulation," a step Isaacs believes will take the Council in the best—and only logical—direction.

"Up to this time we've been living almost exclusively on the idea of (national media) complaints," he said. "It was sort of a strange life, it depended on who wanted to bitch. But that's no longer our sole purpose."

What the media watchdog group is now working on, in addition to its newly-widened roster of complaints, is a series of projects that capitalize on its unique resources.



Norman Isaacs

Aspen Institute Program on Justice, Society and the Individual, Sylvia Roberts, president of the legal defense and education fund of NOW, and advisor Roger J. Traynor, former chief justice of the California Supreme Court, and on the journalistic perspective of media members, among whom are Ralph Otwell, editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Irving Dilliard, former editorial page editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Richard Salant, president of CBS News, and William A. Rusher, publisher of the *National Review*, the NNC is "trying to find its way through the thicket surrounding the gag laws," Isaacs said.

"Since the NNC is not in an adversary

role with anybody, we can be the middleman between the press and bar and try to explore ways to settle the argument," he added.

In addition, the Council is bringing together participants in the 1976 Presidential debates to examine their operation and to make recommendations for any future contests. It is compiling comments by media critics on the function of ombudsmen in the American press, and it is distributing a monthly newsletter that briefly summarizes its activities.

And it will receive further publicity in upcoming issues of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, which, aided by a \$12,000 grant from the William and Mary Greve Foundation, will publish NNC findings in full.

Activism cited

Isaacs, currently editor in residence at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism ("I might be tempted to leave it if we got worked up at the NNC a little more," he admitted), proudly cited the Council's meeting with CIA director George Bush last June as an example of new NNC activism.

"Other newspaper organizations couldn't get past gate two," the former American Society of Newspaper Editors and Associated Press Managing Editors president commented. "The CIA wasn't about to give it to them. But the NNC was perceived as being outside the (journalism) profession. As far as I know it was the first time the CIA has cooperated with a media organization."

The intelligence agency's affiliations with American news organizations was the topic of discussion at the meeting.

Also mentioned in the same context was the Council's condemnation of restrictive press proposals, brought up by Third World nations at a UNESCO meet-

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(orig under Isaacs)